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ABSTRACT

A classification system for freshman courses that is useful as a planning tool and descriptive guide is presented and examples of analogous programs are described. Three approaches to freshman courses--interdisciplinary, developmental, and utilitarian--form a continuum, since many courses are derived from more than one philosophical base. The following features of the different kinds of courses are discussed: the philosophy, the roles of the teacher and learner, instructional mode, functions and structural emphases, and organizational climate. Generally, interdisciplinary courses are offered through liberal arts or general studies divisions, and the subject matter is enhanced through the integration of a variety of disciplines. Generally, developmental courses are affiliated with counseling services or general studies divisions and focus upon the student as a person and his or her self-perceptions and relationships with other individuals, society, and the college experience. Generally, utilitarian courses are associated with student affairs divisions and emphasize the student's mastery of a defined knowledge base such as institutional policies, procedures, and resources, or basic skills. Programs at several colleges are cited as examples of the different approaches. The freshman course offers a means to increase faculty, administrator, and counselor interaction with new students and to involve student affairs staff in the formal curriculum. It can also identify programs and services to correspond more meaningfully to student goals. (SW)

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Research on student retention (Eckland, 1964; Marsh, 1966; Rootman, 1974) indicates that attrition is heaviest during, or at the end of the freshman year. Persistence in college is viewed as a function of the harmony or lack of it between the student and institutional environment (Cope and Hannah, 1975). More specifically, if a student is fully integrated into the social and academic systems of a college or university, then presumably that individual will have more positive perceptions of the institutional environment, participate more extensively in social activities, and perform at a higher level of academic achievement than a less fully integrated student (Tinto, 1975).

Through student affairs most schools plan orientation programs to be the formal point of interface to enhance student adjustment and integration. Historically, orientation was a continuous program such as a required course throughout the first semester or year. For numerous reasons, this type of program tended to prove unsuccessful and was dropped (Matthews, 1976). However, more current information indicates freshman courses are being developed and are taught at many colleges and universities (Knight and Eckhardt, 1977), and these courses are broadening the scope of orientation far beyond student affairs. There is further reason to assume the trend to offer freshman courses to facilitate student integration will continue as more educators search for ways to minimize the projected leveling and decline of student enrollments in the next decade.

The purpose of this article is to present a classification system for freshman courses that is useful as a planning tool and as a descriptive guide, and examples of analogous programs. The system was developed by identifying the dominant themes from current practices in 20 colleges and universities.

The courses share common goals of focusing on the student's relationship to higher education and the educational process, and providing a transitional base to college upon which a student can build to achieve his or her maximum potential. On the other hand the objectives and processes are varied depending upon the school's emphasis on academic, social, or academic and social integration and its missions, goals, and clienteles.

There are three approaches to freshman courses: interdisciplinary, developmental, and utilitarian. These categories should be viewed as forming a continuum, reflecting the fact that many courses derive their roots from more than one philosophical base. The characteristic features discussed include: the philosophy, the teacher's and learner's roles, instructional mode, functions and structural emphases, and organizational climate.

Interdisciplinary Courses

Generally, interdisciplinary courses are offered through liberal arts or general studies divisions. The courses assume education is concerned with the "whole" student and the college or university is intellectual in nature. Subject matter is enhanced through the integration of a variety of disciplines. The assumptions underlying the learner's role are that the student has abilities, needs, and interests; the educational process must be relevant; and intellectual behavior is influenced by social and emotional behavior (Whitmire, 1976, p. 1). Specifically, students become motivated and increasingly involved as they investigate the interrelationships of the disciplines and apply knowledge and principles to current problems and issues.

The teacher's role is to provide the intellectual constructs through lectures and reading assignments and to foster a setting conducive to learning

principles and methods of thought and inquiry. Most courses are taught in small groups of 8 to 20 students, giving students an opportunity to work closely with faculty and classmates. The teachers are usually faculty affiliated with an academic discipline or individuals associated with general studies curricula. Team teaching by faculty from different disciplines is a frequent practice. Occasionally, student personnel staff and upperclass students are involved.

The organizational climate of the class is one of formalized, interpersonal relations. However, these relations can evolve into more informal ones as the students become more involved in the pursuit of knowledge. When this occurs the class develops into a "traditional" seminar.

Course evaluation is incidental, with grades linked closely to prescribed course requirements. Courses are offered for credit with grades or on a pass/fail basis.

In the Field

At Drew University a Freshman Seminar Program is coordinated by the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts with seminar sections of 14 to 16 students staffed by faculty members of various departments. The required 3-credit course is designed to (a) improve students' skills in writing and speaking, (b) give freshmen an opportunity to be introduced to a discipline by working closely with a scholar-teacher in a small class setting, and (c) improve academic advising by having the seminar instructor serve as the student's academic advisor. Seminar topics such as "biofeedback," "the use and abuse of public opinion research," and "sexuality" are generated by the faculty members and reflect their expertise.

At Morningside College a general theme such as "the American Dream" is chosen each year. Individual sections of 17 to 20 students have specific

emphases reflecting diverse curricular areas and interests of instructors. Student initiative and involvement are stressed through a wide variety of activities including essays, films, panels, and trips (Freshman Seminar Booklet, 1976).

At Tufts University, students and faculty team-teach interdisciplinary seminars. The professor serves primarily as a resource person-participant with the upperclass student functioning as discussion leader. Topics include "self discovery through literature," and"biosocial problems." The faculty member serves as academic advisor for the 10 to 12 students (Knight and Eckhardt, 1977).

Developmental Courses

Generally, developmental courses are affiliated with counseling services or general studies divisions. These courses focus upon the student as a person and his or her self-perceptions and relationships with other individuals, society, and the college experience. Education is viewed as learning from a variety of experiences of which higher education is one. The college is viewed as a social institution where students assume new roles and where they are confronted with value decisions that can change their lives.

The learner's role is elected by the student on the basis of individual interests and needs. The educational process is intended to be relevant, and a strong emphasis is placed on the present experience or the "here and now" of the individual learner.

The teacher is a facilitator who identifies and guides the range of choices available to students. This role may be determined by mutual agreement of students and teacher or it may evolve from the needs of the students.

The instructional mode assumes a variety of formats, but the small group with a teacher as a facilitator is the predominate one. Emphasizing group experiences and participation of all members role playing, field experiences and journals are also a part of a flexible and informal format. The teacher is usually from a social science, counseling, or student personnel background. Team teaching involving graduate assistants or upperclass undergraduate students is common.

The method of evaluation is nonjudgmental. Courses are offered for credit on a pass/fail basis. Grades are derived from self-evaluation or a contract system. With both approaches, participation is important. Evaluation is generally an insignificant part of the course and may be based upon individual descriptive reports.

In the Field

University 101 is offered at the University of South Carolina under the direction of the Office of the Vice President for Instruction, with faculty or student affairs staff teaching classes of 20 to 25 freshmen. The optional pass/fail course carries three hours elective credit. It is designed to (a) expose students to the purposes of higher education and their potential roles as students and (b) enhance their adaptation to the university. Students receive an orientation to the university and an introduction to the instructor's own discipline and/or role in the institution. Problems freshmen frequently experience are examined in a group setting. The course format is flexible. Readings, resource persons, and field experiences are the catalysts for discussions as well as individual and group projects.

At Bowling Green University, student and staff or faculty teams serve as mentors to the University Seminar Program. Mentor teams follow a curricular guide to address such topics as the functions of higher education, teaching

techniques and academic advising, career education and life planning, student services, and the administrative organization of the university. Emphasis is placed upon student assignments related to each topic which can enhance student growth developmentally and fortify intellectual skills (Whitmire, 1976).

At West Virginia University, teams of faculty members or administrators and students offer Orientation I to help new students understand and facilitate academic, social, administrative and personal adjustment. Most of the course is designed to develop skills and knowledge for individuals to function as college students. Topics such as the nature of knowledge, designing a curriculum, understanding academic policies, and utilizing university resources to define and achieve social and career goals are included.

Utilitarian Courses

Generally, utilitarian courses are associated with student affairs divisions. The courses emphasize the student's mastery of a defined knowledge base such as institutional policies, procedures, and resources, or basic skills. The student's relationship with the school is secondary. Education is concerned with the "whole" student, with the underlying assumption that the college experience is based upon a defined level of competency, and a mastery of tasks and skills.

The student's role is highly prescribed to accomplish certain tasks in a variety of subject areas. It is assumed that self-awareness and knowledge of the institution will improve the student's overall ability to succeed in college. The teacher's role is to guide and direct the student through a range of choices. Course content is highly structured and frequently designed to be taught in multiple-course sections. Usually the teacher is a

member of the student affairs staff or an undergraduate student. Occasionally, faculty members may teach utilitarian courses.

The instructional mode assumes a variety of prescribed alternatives open to student choice. Often a workbook accompanies the course containing a detailed syllabus and exercises to be completed to demonstrate mastery of a topic. Strong emphasis is placed on field visits to offices and resources of the college.

Courses are offered for credit with grades or on a pass/fail basis. In colleges with open admissions, the course is frequently mandatory for all entering students. When this occurs, the course may be offered on a pass/fail basis.

In the Field

Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale Campus offers General 100, Orientation, through the Counseling Service. Counselors, with the assistance of other faculty members and staff, instruct the one-credit required course. The ten-week course is designed to provide (a) useful information about the college, (b) skills and resources for educational and career planning, and (c) personal development through group activities, seminars, and individual projects (Everything You Always Wanted to Know, 1976).

The course is highly structured, utilizing formal presentations and audio visual materials to cover areas such as administrative policies and procedures, the community college, and study skills. Students contract with their instructors for grades and choose course requirements from a variety of alternatives designed to take into account the individual differences of the community college population.

At Kent State University trained peer instructors guide students through the University service system and facilities, and assist with

advising and scheduling. The course parallels a workbook/resource guide designed for the program. Emphasis is placed upon the seminar as a support and resource group, and students to make the environment work for them (Shible, Evanick, and Sorensen, 1976).

The freshman seminar at Hunter College is taught by faculty from the Office of Academic Advising and Student Services. The course emphasizes elements of learning and decision making such as course selection, study skills, and educational planning. Course work is placed in a broad context of student development focusing on individual students needs and interests (Freshman Seminar, 1976). The course is required of open admissions students and is optional for others.

Discussion

Student personnel staff must be prepared to assume leadership roles in responding to the changing needs of freshman students and their interface with the institution. The freshman course offers a means to increase faculty, administrator, and counselor interaction with new students and to involve student affairs staff in the formal curriculum. It also can identify programs and services to correspond more meaningfully to student goals, and better serve the complex needs of freshmen as has been evidenced by increases in student retention and use of student services (Fidler, 1976).

With common core components of informal contact with peers and faculty or staff, a small group setting, and cognitive and effective learning, the interdisciplinary, developmental and utilitarian courses represent diverse approaches to achieve a common goal of facilitating adjustment to a college environment and increasing retention. They often require changing faculty and

staff perceptions and behavior to realize shared purposes beyond a single disciplinary or departmental orientation.

Freshman courses cannot be effectively introduced simply by the procedures normally used for new courses or programs, particularly for universities that stress graduate teaching and research. They must be given special support if they are to have fair chances of success (Knight and Eckhart, 1977, p. 6), whether the success is measured by further guiding the students toward integration within the college environment and personal growth or increasing faculty and staff interaction understanding of their respective roles, responsibilities, and needs.

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